



## Conference Paper

# Fundamental Methodological Approaches of Intercultural Research: An American Experience

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## Abstract

This article explores the main characteristics of the discipline of intercultural communication as it was developed in the USA in the first decades after the World War II. The author demonstrates that the increasing globalization and the postwar political situation made it necessary to develop intercultural communication as a practical-oriented discipline aimed to teach its practitioners practical skills of intercultural interaction and communication.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, multiculturalism, Edward T. Hall, intercultural theory, intercultural practice, intercultural competence

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## 1. Introduction

Today we can't imagine any research of contemporary culture and society without taking into consideration those powerful centripetal and centrifugal forces which dynamically, controversially and increasingly more dramatically shape the global community. That is not a tribute to fashion or scientific 'bon ton', but rather a symptom of how these problems are rooted in real life and caused by the tremendous shifts in global economics and ethno-demographic circumstances resulting from the workforce import, mass migrations of populations around the globe, ecological problems and rising social tensions.

These shifts have contributed to the emergence of large-scale international, interethnic and intercultural problems that have laid the foundations for a new type of society - neither a classical nation state, nor a multicultural society. In their attempt to define the nature of this society, many scholars called it the society of 'risk', 'uncertainty', 'fear' or a 'society of difference', yet events of the recent years made us question these typologies and turned all analytical criteria upside down making us, once again, search for the new ones.

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## 2. Methods

In this article we would like to focus on the American research into intercultural communication and intercultural interaction between people belonging to different cultural backgrounds. We would argue that the methodological approaches that constitute the foundations of this discipline are crucial to unlocking challenges posed by our world today.

Edward Hall became a pioneer of intercultural research; later his ideas were developed by Robert T. Oliver, A. Smith, Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter, John Condon and Fathi Yousef, K. S. Sitaram and Roy T. Cogdell, William B. Gudykunst, Clyde K. Kluckhohn and Fred L. Strodbeck, as well as Geert Hofstede. They successfully advanced theoretical grounds of the discipline having improved the methodology and shaped the main directions of intercultural research [5, pp. 7–13].

## 3. Analysis

A question might be asked, why we decide to closely scrutinize American theories of intercultural communication? First, this choice is determined by the leading position of the USA in intercultural communication research. As an independent academic discipline, it was born, shaped and developed in this country. So, in addressing an American research tradition, we appeal to one of the most advanced, respected and long-term academic traditions in the field of intercultural communication. The leading position of American school is also proved by its robust expansion into Europe and Russia.

Second, American theories of intercultural communication were the first to emerge as a response to the challenges of globalism, and their experience can play a crucial role in understanding the present situation. Rapid economic growth in the USA after the end of World War II and the establishment of a bipolar geopolitical model of the world have radically transformed this country into a great post-industrial superpower and an irrefutable world leader.

Since the USA was the first country to achieve the modern level of a highly developed and highly dynamic society, they were the first to face the necessity of solving the problems of intercultural interaction. In the process of doing just that they developed a special methodology that would tackle the problems of intercultural tension, misunderstanding and conflicts once and for all.

The new discipline was designed to foster the determination of 'correct' socio-cultural position – that is to help every member of society to re-think the changes

that take place in their personal perception of the world under the impact of global and glocal trends. This is precisely why methodology and experience of intercultural communication research is so invaluable and in high-demand today and we would like to give a brief analysis of its fundamental approaches.

The secret of success and the first fundamental methodological approach is the discipline's **practical orientation** that can be analyzed in two aspects. First of all, intercultural communication research was sparked off by actual situations and problems, that is, the practice of intercultural interaction as such. Secondly, this methodology is aimed at acquiring practical results and developing methods that would teach people how to interact efficiently.

The reason why intercultural communication research is so permanently embedded in practice can be traced back to its emergence as an independent academic discipline. It all started in 1946 with the foundation of the Foreign Service Institute. Its goal was to undertake results-oriented research into intercultural communication and the problems of its failure. It is in the corridors of this institute that theoretical, as well as practical research into the problems of intercultural interaction was set in motion. Scholars specializing in different fields – linguists, anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists – were invited to take up the challenge of developing practical abilities and skills of intercultural communication aside from theoretical ones.

The establishment of the Institute was triggered by an absolutely shocking failure of American diplomatic missions around the world, accompanied by the misfortunes of the Peace Corps and the grand fiasco of numerous American ideological projects, which were meant to boost economy of the Third World nations. Let us briefly cite an example of the first and most scandalous failure of American diplomatic corps. It helped Americans make the first step towards understanding and recognizing their national identity in the context of international relations. The problems of diplomatic corps were satirized in a best-selling book 'The Ugly American' [8].

Edward Hall, a director of the Foreign Service Institute, who had to work primarily with diplomats and diplomatic staff, summarized the situation at hand: "What... would [it] be like if we had, say, ten thousand foreigners, all of the same nationality, living in our midst, none of whom learned our language, and who kept themselves isolated from us? Who, furthermore, gave parties, imported their own goods, drove their own brand of automobiles,... mispronounced our names, couldn't tell us apart, and then made rude and tactless remarks?" [7, p. 61].

This painful negative experience of intercultural interaction, combined with equally traumatizing personal experience of 'culture shock' (The term 'culture shock' was first

introduced by an American anthropologist K. Oberg in 1960 to describe a whole range of unpleasant feelings that are experienced by a person upon entering a previously unknown culture.), had been experienced by thousands of people as a feeling of complete disorientation and confusion in another cultural environment. As a result, these people realized that 'even a perfect command of foreign languages couldn't prepare them for complicated work-related issues abroad'. All of this firmly set the subject of intercultural communication on the practical course

This negative, pessimistic experience of intercultural (international, interethnic) interactions that was gained through multiple trials and errors contributes greatly to our understanding of the global situation today. This experience demonstrates a unique value of practical skills and abilities, not just theoretical knowledge. That was also stressed by Edward Hall, a founder of intercultural communications, who, to his great surprise, noticed that his students at the Foreign Service Institute were much less interested in his lectures on theory of intercultural communication, which they constantly interrupted with 'what-to-do' and 'how-to-react' questions rooted in their personal experience.

## 4. Discussion

Of course, we could have ascribed this practice-oriented approach to a particular American mindset that prefers to solve the practical problems rather than the theoretical ones. This well-known American pragmatism is often understood to be shaped by the Protestant religious ethics. This is how American political analyst J. Kelly phrased it: "[The New World] offered the opportunities to answer both religious expectations and more pragmatic ones. So, the mundane reality met the transcendence and obtained ontology, while pragmatism and utilitarianism were elevated to the heights of transcendental ethic imperative in the minds of Americans" [4, p. 101].

However, if, on the other hand, we turn our attention to European intercultural communication research, we will see the same practical orientation: "The formation of the European Union opened borders to free flow of people, capital and goods. [...] Practice posed the problem of communication between people with different cultural background" [1, p. 11]. In fact, many European universities have developed their courses building on the American traditions of teaching intercultural communication and adding materials from folklore, ethnology and linguistics. Consequently, we can assert that practical approach is embedded in the intercultural communication research; it plays a leading role in relation to the theoretical one.

Further, we would like to discuss the second key methodological approach – a striving for mutual understanding, which is frequently viewed as a meta-goal: “Communication is the process through which participants create and share information with one another as they move toward reaching mutual understanding” [7, p. 113]. The problem of understanding cultural differences is at the core of American research, since these differences are, allegedly, to blame for all the problems and tensions in intercultural communication.

A specialist in intercultural communication is expected to present a thorough and objective analysis, description and explanation of cultural differences to the potential participants of intercultural communication situation, gradually leading them from noticing cultural differences to understanding them by employing empathy-based intercultural sensitivity or intercultural competence. The goal here is a gradual development of a culturally pluralistic worldview. Actually, both terms, ‘intercultural sensitivity’ or ‘intercultural competence’, have a very close meaning in intercultural research – they are interpreted as the communicants’ ability to understand and accept cultural differences, as well as adequately react to them when encountered in real life.

In order to achieve this meta-goal, they often appeal to older traditions pioneered in humanities, and analyze their approaches to formulate their own interdisciplinary methodology that would tackle the problems of intercultural understanding by choosing information in a way that can help participants in different situations of intercultural interaction: professional, everyday, gender, religious, educational, ethnic and national.

Stating that the problem of intercultural understanding is embedded in the research of intercultural communication and remains inseparable from its essence, we imply a borderline character of this research. The object under scrutiny is always on the border and is defined only when this border has been crossed. Regardless of whether we are talking about intercultural, international, interracial, interethnic or any other types of communication mentioned earlier, the object of research always emerges on the one condition only – when it comes into contact with ‘Otherness’; that is when we cross the border of our culture and become aware of the cultural differences.

Most people – even those with the higher education (We would like to note that many scholars stress that there is a direct correlation between the communicants’ level of education and their degree of intercultural competence: the higher the level of education and fluency in foreign languages, the higher the level of competence. Of course, other factors also contribute to the degree of competence), who are supposed to have at least a vague understanding of how much a lifestyle in different countries can vary –nevertheless experience a ‘culture shock’ when they find themselves in the

real situation of intercultural interaction. This state of shock proves that they have reached the borders of their native culture and have encountered something different, disparate, that they have entered a new cultural space where their usual navigation system isn't effective anymore.

The last methodological feature that we would like to mention is a **combination of communicative and cross-cultural approaches** (3 See detailed analysis of this approach in these articles: [2, 3]) in intercultural analysis – that is, a cross-cultural approach to the communicative process and a communicative approach to cultural research: “[...] culture and communication work in tandem – they are inseparable. In fact, it is often difficult to decide which is the voice and which is the echo” [6, p. 6].

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can say that a brief overview of the main methodological approaches of American intercultural communication school, which has a seventy-year practice, proves its practical orientation aimed at molding the skills that would ensure effective intercultural interaction and reduce the level of participants' xenophobia and hostility towards people of other cultures and nationalities which are crucial for living in a new world today.

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